

The play's the thing: redefining and rethinking play

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Seen on the London underground

A baby of about five months old, being held by his father, looked at his mother and shook his head at her. She immediately made a laughing face with wide eyes and giant smile and shook her head back. The people around them looked on, smiling. The little interaction went on over several turns until a man close by decided to join in and imitated what the mother had been doing. The baby, instead of responding, looked both puzzled and worried and gazed at the strange man, then back at his mother, then at the man again and so on.

What has this to do with play? I would suggest that the mother and baby have developed a game with rules (your turn/my turn; you do something which I copy; I watch you /you watch me; I am quiet when you do your turn/you are quiet when I do my turn). Each time they enact this turn-taking ritual they reinforce the strength of their relationship and the baby builds communicative competence. When a stranger tries to join in this very personal ritual the baby (less than six months old, remember) does not respond but looks to his mother as if to ask 'Who is this person and what right does he have to expect me to respond to him when I have never seen him before?'

A little unpicking

1. There are many who people who define play as something that is fun and pleasurable. Play may be pleasurable but it can often involve a struggle or be related to coming to understand difficult experiences.
2. There are others who talk about purposeful play as though there can be play without a purpose. If the child has chosen to do it there must be some reason or purpose in the mind of the child.
3. There are people who talk of play as self-chosen activity and, in the next breath, tell a child to go and play in the home corner or with the blocks. Self-chosen cannot include chosen by the adult.
4. We hear people tell us that 'play is a child's work' or insist that children only learn through play. Work to me implies doing something in order to earn money or to reach the goals of others. And play is only one of many ways of learning.

Misunderstandings like these illustrate the confusion that abounds in the educational community. And sometimes the theorists, researchers, writers and government proposals just add to the confusion. So let us try and think more carefully about what play is and about why it matters.

My re-definition

My thesis is that play is always purposeful. Even the play we often observe and dismiss as being 'messaging about' or 'without direction' reveals that it is purposeful when considered more carefully. More than that, play is one of the most common and significant ways in which babies, toddlers, children and even adults make sense of their world and of the objects and people in it. Here are some examples for you to analyse in terms of looking for any possible purpose in the minds of the players.

Ten month old Bola picks up a stick, looks carefully at it, turns it round and round in his hands, passes it from one hand to another and then drops it on the ground. He picks it up again and repeats the whole performance. When he picks it up a second time he immediately drops it again and picks it up with a smile.

Ama (aged five) climbs up and down the steps of the climbing frame, comes indoors and makes vertical marks on sheet after sheet of paper. Then she takes the dolls in the doll's house and makes them go up and down the stairs. The next day her mother comes in, furious, saying that Ama took one of her felt pens and made vertical lines on the walls of her bedroom.

Would you describe each of these attempts as play? Can you say that each of these learners has a purpose in mind? Can you say what the purpose is?

- Bola is clearly engaged in exploratory behaviour and I would suggest that the question he seems to be asking is 'What is this thing? What does it do?' He explores it through touch and movement and accidentally, perhaps, drops it and notices what happens. So the next time he intentionally drops it and is pleased with the result. By chance he comes to understand more about the world: things that are let go of fall through the air. He has discovered gravity. His purpose is to discover more about the stick and what it can do or what he can do with it.

- Ama's behaviour is potentially very irritating (especially for her mother) and it seems to be random or haphazard. In reality what she is engaged in is exploring a schema – a repeated pattern of behaviour. She has a definite interest in verticality: up and down, straight lines, stairs and so on. Ama's purpose is to come to understand more about up and down.

I would call all of these attempts play. So I would like to redefine play to include reference to purpose, as follows:

Play is the way in which children, in particular, set about doing any or all of the following:

- *trying to solve a problem they have set themselves;*
- *experiencing something that interests or scares or excites them;*
- *exploring and expressing their feelings relating to their experiences.*

From this it follows that all play is purposeful because the child is using it for a reason. The child owns the reason and therefore the play. The child is in control of what to do and how to do it. This implies that in play there is no sense of failure because the child can change the purpose during it. The play itself may well be pleasurable or fun, but it may also be deeply disturbing and traumatic. So play is what the learner chooses to do in order to address a need that has arisen in her or his mind.

From this we can draw a number of conclusions, many of which agree with some other definitions of what play is and why it matters. It is essential that the child or learner *has ownership of the play* – as Janet Moyles (1998) tells us. Vygotsky (1978) felt that the only type of behaviour that could justifiably be called play was imaginative play which he described as *'imagination in action'*. For him it was only when a child was able to move beyond the here and now, the visible and the actual to the meaning, to the possible, to the questions 'what if' and 'as if', that we can call it play. More than this, Vygotsky argued that all play involves *rules*. But the rules are not imposed on the play by others but arise from it and are constructed by the player or players. He talked, famously, of how a child, in imaginative play, reveals more about his or her understanding than in any other activity (see Smidt 2009). Bruner (1966) talked of play as *memory in action*, which reminds us that in play the child draws on previous experiences in order to understand something new or interesting. So memory is crucial and it is by comparing something new to

something remembered that new understandings are forged. The child begins to group things together, to categorise and classify and compare. The links with cognition are clear. Tina Bruce (1991) talked of free-flow play as being an *integrating mechanism*, by which she meant that in this play a child brings together various aspects of prior learning and experience and in doing this arrived at new understanding. Corinne Hutt (Hutt *et al.* 1989) drew attention to the role of the adult in promoting learning through play. And isn't it interesting that although she was writing so long ago she noted that where adults were able to focus on what it was the child was interested in or paying attention to, they were able to enhance learning through their comments on a *shared focus of attention*? This is what those involved in current research (Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002) are telling us and you will find mention of this in the Foundation Stage documents.

The implications of this for practice

If you operate on the assumption that all play is purposeful, you have to ensure that you are really attentive to what children do and say and that to which they pay attention. You have to observe closely and take note of their interests, passions, fears, theories and questions. You can then ensure that in your setting you offer, provide or set out activities and resources which you believe will allow children to follow their interests, answer their questions, express their feelings. You then observe again – and interact where appropriate – ensuring that your interaction is based entirely on what it is the child focuses on. For me this is the essence of good practice. You pass control to the child, but continue to offer opportunities for other modes of learning where sometimes you, the adult, lead – things like story telling, reading to children, enabling them to make and listen to music, to dance and paint and draw, and to use screens of various types. Children will learn from all of these.

N.B. This brief article sets out the writer's current thinking in preparation for a new book she is writing on play. It would be great for her to get some responses from TACTYC members. There must be lots you want to say from your own experiences.

You are invited to interact and give your views on Sandra's thoughts on play. Do email j.moyles@ntlworld.com and tell us if this definition is helpful to you in understanding why play is important in children's learning.

References

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